Local Historian Publishes New Book on the Founding of Fairbury

By: Dale C. Maley
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The earliest book which describes the founding of Fairbury is William Le Baron's 1878 book titled ***The History of Livingston County, Illinois.*** This book notes the first two settlers in Livingston County were Frederick Rook and V.M. Darnall. Mr. Darnall settled south of Fairbury. Mr. Rook located west of Pontiac at Rook's Creek.

This 1878 history book also describes the founding of Fairbury. It notes the key players were farmer Caleb Patton and railroad engineer Octave Chanute. Caleb Patton offered the Octave Chanute half of the new city lots if Chanute would run the new train tracks through his farm. Chanute accepted the offer, and Patton laid out the village of Fairbury.

Fairbury historian Dale C. Maley recently became aware of two new historical reference sources. The first source is a database maintained by the Bureau of Land Management. This database contains a record of the purchases of farmland from the Government. This database is searchable by the purchaser's name and by the township. This database can be used to see who the early pioneer farmers were in the Fairbury area.

The second new historical reference source is a complete land abstract which documents the founding of Fairbury. Fairbury resident Debbie Kaye Craddock preserved this 1957 abstract and made a copy available to Maley. In 1957, Bert Moulton, the barber, bought his shop on the east end of Locust street. The land abstract for this real-estate transaction covers the history of this land back to when it was purchased from the Government. This document includes the farmer Caleb Patton and the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad engineer Octave Chanute. It adds a new colorful character to the story of the founding of Fairbury, Dr. J. Leland Miller.

Diane Pawlowski had also done some excellent research on early Fairbury. Using the 1860 U.S. Census, she identified the occupation of all 262 residents of Fairbury. This information gives a great snapshot of Fairbury just three years after it was founded.

The farmland around Fairbury was mostly swampland. In the 1880s, clay field tile started to be used to drain the swampy land. This tiling revolution turned worthless swampland into some of the most productive farmland on the planet.

Large tile factories in Fairbury were run by Mr. Strait and Mr. McDowell. Bill Fugate recently donated some old clay tile to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. It is believed these tiles were made on the Fugate farm.

Maley decided to use all of this information to write a new book about the founding of Fairbury. He wanted to expand the story to include the pioneer farmers in Avoca, Indian

Grove, and Belle Prairie townships. He also wanted to explain the tiling revolution that occurred on Fairbury farms. Another goal of the new book was to expand the story of how the village of Fairbury was founded. He wanted to include the role of Dr. J. Leland Miller in the founding of Fairbury. He also wanted to review the occupations of the citizens of Fairbury in 1860.

The mindset in the 1800s was that if the land was not close to a river and did not have trees, it was considered worthless. This explains why Southern Illinois was the first part of the state to be settled. It also explains why Central Illinois was the last area to be settled.

By 1840, a few pioneer farmers settled in Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie townships. Every single one of these pioneer farmers bought land located on either the Vermilion River or on Indian Creek.

After 1840, very few additional farmers located in the Fairbury area. In 1850, Congress passed a new law, granting farmland to military veterans. Most of these were veterans of the War of 1812. Very few of these veterans wanted to move to swampy Central Illinois. They chose to sell their land rights at a discount to the official Federal Government price of $2.50 per acre.

This new 1850 law triggered a wave of new pioneer farmers into the Fairbury area. Most of these pioneer farmers came in the 1852-1855 period. The 1850 law was phased out by 1860. Land sales in the Fairbury area also died off by 1860.

A new Illinois state law in 1851 authorized the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad to run new tracks from Peoria east to the Indiana state line. Both farmers and land speculators got very excited after this new law was passed. A substantial financial return could be made if the railroad was run through a farm which was then converted to city residential building lots.

The new 1851 law triggered a lot of speculation in Fairbury area farmland. One of those land deals even made the Chicago newspapers. In 1855, Dr. J. Leland Miller bought 212 acres at $12.50 per acre. Just 10 months later, Dr. Miller sold this same land for $25/acre. He doubled his money in less than 10 months!

As the new railroad neared Fairbury, the competition heated up between three farmers. Caleb Patton won the competition by offering Octave Chanute half the new town building lots if he would run the track through his farm. Caleb Patton had bought his land from Dr. J. Leland Miller.

The other two farmers who lost the competition were not happy. They threatened to get court injunctions to prevent the railroad from being laid on Patton's farm.

Octave Chanute came up with a brilliant plan. He decided to run the new railroad up to the edge of Patton's farm and then stop laying new rails. He had his crew resume the track laying on the other side of Patton's farm.

Chanute knew the Livingston County courthouse in Pontiac was closed on Saturdays and Sundays. No court injunction could be obtained on the weekend. He was also aware of a law about new railroad tracks. The law said that once a locomotive was run over new tracks, the tracks could not be removed.

Chanute sent his crew to Patton's farm on a Friday night. During the weekend, his men laid the track on Patton's farm. When the rails were installed, he had a locomotive run over the new tracks. By Monday morning, the railroad was completed through Patton's' farm.

One of the two farmers that lost the competition was Mr. Atkins. Although he lost the competition to have the railroad run through his farm, he gained a new son-in-law. Dr. J. Leland Miller married his daughter Julia. They lived in Fairbury a few years, then moved back East where he was from. Dr. Miller became a very wealthy man.

Maley hopes this new book helps people better understand how both our farms and the village of Fairbury was founded.

Maley donated printed copies of the new book to the Fairbury Dominy library, the Fairbury Echoes Museum, and the Pontiac library. Printed copies of the book can be purchased from the Walton Centre in Fairbury. Kindle e-books or conventional printed books can also be bought from Amazon.com.

The Founding of Fairbury, Illinois

Dale C. Maley